



HORACE TAPSCOTT:

Music for the People

There are those pessimists who lament that jazz has become an elite art form isolated from the black community. Horace Tapscott is an optimist who believes that jazz is music for the people. The pianist and composer has eschewed fame or fortune to devote his energies to bringing the music to Watts, Los Angeles' black community.

Born on April 6, 1934, in Houston, Texas, Tapscott first studied piano with his mother. After his family moved to Los Angeles in 1945, he entered Jefferson High School where he came under the wing of Dr. Samuel Brown, who schooled an entire generation of future jazz stars. In the school's Swing Band, Tapscott played with Don Cherry, Dexter Gordon, Eric Dolphy, Sonny Criss and Art Farmer.

After high school, Horace went to Los Angeles City College for a short while and also worked with Dolphy in the Gerald Wilson Orchestra. He then joined the service from 1953-57, playing trombone, baritone horn and piano in the Air Force Band.

Up to this point, Tapscott's career was typical for a young musician paying his dues. Upon returning to Los Angeles, he took up work in the studios, mainly on trombone. He also started working as a "ghost writer" — black musicians still were not fully accepted — for singers like Julie London and several Las Vegas shows.

In the late '50s, Horace found himself working with Lionel Hampton, but he was left stranded in New York City one winter when the band broke up. At the Village Vanguard he hooked up with Dolphy and Coltrane. Although the two were recording for a major jazz label at the time, they only had a few dollars between them. Tapscott decided not to go through the motions of making a career, but dedicated himself to resisting the exploitation of Black Music and taking the music directly to the community.

by JASON WEISS

Back in Los Angeles, he founded the first Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra in 1961. At first, the Arkestra played for free on the street corners and in different churches. Tapscott and several other members of the Arkestra began conducting summer music workshops for the children of Watts. He also led his own small combo whose changing personnel included Azar Lawrence and Black Arthur (better known as Arthur Blythe). In the early days of the Arkestra there were other gigs with Slim Gaillard, Sarah Vaughan, Lorez Alexandria and Freddie Hill, but soon the community music program began taking up more of his time.

Over the last two decades several hundred musicians have passed through the ranks of the Arkestra. The Arkestra itself has survived many difficult moments, including the Watts riots. At the height of the riots, the police drew their guns on the band leader and ordered the musicians to stop playing, claiming that the music was inciting the people outside. When the police left, the musicians began playing again.

Until recently, the Arkestra's regular home — on the last Sunday of each month — was Rev. E. Edwards' Immanuel United Church of Christ. But since the reverend's illness, Tapscott's U.G.M.A.A. Foundation (Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension) has set up shop in its own building, formerly a printer's workshop. Tapscott describes the Foundation's main function as "the education of young musicians in a non-competitive, commercial-free atmosphere of love and reverence for the music."

Until a few years ago, Tapscott's only LP as a leader was the small combo recording "The Giant Has Awakened"

(Flying Dutchman), long since out-of-print. His music has started to reach a wider audience thanks to the independent label, Nimbus Records (P.O. Box 1864, Ventura, Calif. 93001). According to Nimbus producer Tom Albach, the label intends to release at least three Tapscott LPs a year for the next four to five years because it will take at least 15 records to cover all of Horace's music. The two latest releases, "The Tapscott Sessions, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2," are the first in a series of solo piano recordings documenting the work of Tapscott and other unknown black composers in the Los Angeles area.

Tapscott's legend has started to spread beyond the confines of Watts. The following conversation with JF contributor Jason Weiss took place after the pianist's first appearances before European audiences.

JAZZ FORUM: As a musician you have been closely involved with the black community in Los Angeles for well over 20 years. What made you decide to concentrate your efforts on community music making rather than seek fame or fortune on the road?

HORACE TAPSCOTT: Years ago my mentor, Mr. Samuel Brown at Jefferson High, told me he would show me the ways if I promised to pass them on too, dig. I couldn't do it formally, that is to say through the schoolrooms. I wanted to do that, but I lost the feeling for it. I could do the same thing perhaps outside, directly. And so we started in little houses, garages. We had four or five different places.

You see, by growing up with the music and the musicians around here in Los Angeles, I had a chance to get a panorama view and see what happened to certain cats, and *why* it happened. The main reason was because they had no support. At one point, when the people were coming off their jobs on

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Friday night and Saturday, they were looking forward to the music because they could dance and all that. So the musician was thought of in this light. But it's something else for the music to live through the years, and to last and have a meaning. Like the music of Duke Ellington, that will always live. Well, that's the kind of music I like to be in, the classic type that maybe people can appreciate. I want to teach with it, and speak of a whole era and why it happened. But it needs all sides to teach it and balance it.

JF: You originally studied trombone as well as piano. When did you put down the trombone for good?

HT: When I was just about 19, but I did go back with Lionel Hampton on 'bone for a year. That was in the last part of 1960. I was playing the piano then, writing and arranging, but I wasn't working.

Probably the pianist Gerald Wilson told him about Lester Robertson. And Lester told him that he'd get the other cat. So, Lester called me one night and said, "Hey, man, you want to go to New York?" We didn't have no job and the rent was due. And I said, "Yeah, man, let's go."

We went and there's Lionel Hampton. We got put out in the snow after a while when the band stopped working. Hamp went to Africa and only took five pieces, so we were left in the city for about four months. When the band came back, we went through the South. That bus ride almost killed me, it was mean. We had to check to see if we could go in the front door to eat. The busdriver was white, so Lionel Hampton always sent him first. One night the cats were so tired on the bus that we said, "Hey, man, no," and we just busted on in. We was just ready for anything, tired. Oh man, that was a hell of a ride.

When the band came back here to Los Angeles to play at a club on Sunset Boulevard, I got off the bus, man. It was four o'clock in the morning, 'cause the gig was over, and they was on their way back to New York. I was sitting there on the bus and said, "What am I doing here? I don't want to go back to New York like this." So I got off the bus. And then no one discovered I was gone until they got to Arizona.

JF: What were the origins of the Underground Musicians Association?

HT: Well, it started because of the actual players. There were several of us around in the area here in the early '50s that were branching off into some other kinds of music, seemingly, to some folks. We'd be playing constantly, night and day, at Linda Hill's home on 75th and Central. And then in my garage on 56th Street and Avalon, five or six of us started our band — Lester Robertson, Jimmy Woods, myself and several other people. When we began in the early '60s, the music started seeming like it had to go somewhere else. And I started playing Negro spirituals and all the music that was written by black composers. So, that in itself started a whole new thing for the cats. I had started doing a lot of my own kinds of writing.

JF: When did you start writing your own music?

HT: In the '50s, but most of it I developed pretty much in the '60s because I had a band. By that time half of the cats in town were around. They got the word that we were rehearsing five nights a week, so they just came by. So we hooked up and we started writing. We started having to get everybody in the band to learn how to write, right, because you had musicians here to play whatever you wrote the next day.

We played in parks and streetcorners and school houses. That's where it was aimed at. And then they started a summer program in Watts in 1963, and so we had quite a whole community of youngsters into the music. They were dancing to this tune, *The Dark Tree*, that we did on the album, "The Giant Has Awakened." The youngsters used to go down the street dancing and singing it. And that was one of the greatest feelings I ever had in my life. And the book was 99% original music. There were about 200 and some odd pieces of written music.

JF: Were most of these your tunes?

HT: Well, mostly mine. And then there were Linda Hill's and so many others'. Some of the writers are still writing for different groups. It was such an experience, most of the cats think of it as a school and an institution. You

come in with your instrument, you want to play, and are you ready for this? Because you're going to have to give up something. And it was the same way with the singers. We would have the singers across the street rehearsing, and I'd be running back and forth. And Linda Hill was coaching them and teaching them music. We had music flying. All this music had come out of the community or from older musicians that no one's heard of.

JF: Were most of the people at that point already reading music?

HT: No. A lot of them learned to read music from the rehearsals every night. And maybe every now and then I would have a class where we'd just clap out. I'd write on the blackboard how to read, and a person would learn to read on the average in two weeks' time before touching the instrument. So they knew it was something separate.

JF: Have you been the main person holding down the Pan-Afrikan Peoples Arkestra?

HT: No. There have been a couple of other people, like David Bryant, our bass player, and Linda Hill, Lester Robertson, Marla Gibbs and Al Hines. See, the idea of the Arkestra is to build itself to the point of 75 to 100 pieces and to become a pillar in the community, where youngsters may grow up and want to play in this kind of orchestra. So it has to keep on.

JF: Has that been the case so far?

HT: So far. There were some who used to come to the concerts in their mamas' bellies. And when they went to college, they'd be playing in the band and now they are bringing their kids. And the youngsters that didn't play instruments — that are doctors, lawyers and promoters — they remember.

JF: Do you have a sense that the youngsters who are grown up now are more aware of the music and its history?

HT: Out of every seven, I would say two. But it was zero when we started. Because the music was related to things like the red light district. There was that kind of image behind it. And they grew over the years and finally it covered the ears, you dig.

JF: It seems that you and the other musicians were bringing that music out into the light of day, so that it wasn't something you had to go inside the closet to hear.

HT: Yeah, and that's one of the reasons why after a period of about 10 years, we changed from the Underground Musicians Association to the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension — U.G.M.A.A. We were musicians, but we had other artists around — writers, dancers and painters. They all were coming to hear music. So, we would try to do certain things together.

JF: Did the change of name also mean a change of direction?

HT: No, we got to a point where we could verbally say more or less what we were a part of. Because then we began to realize that you have a place here. You're put here like plants and flowers to do certain things. All of us were around religious people all our lives. Through the years, people would think of us as a religious group or whatever. After a concert they'd start hooking up things. They'd say, "Oh, your music is more spiritual in intention." And that was the idea — to get black people in particular familiar with the music. That's been 20 years now, and it's still a way to go. Whereas, you don't have to turn yourself out to make some kinds of money, because you can make a decent living playing music. You're creating if you're giving something, you become part of the community. We try to pass something on to the young players and artists that grow up in the community — to see where they fit in by being an artist rather than alienate themselves from the whole populace here.

JF: What about some of the musicians who left the Arkestra and went on to bigger things? You first began playing with Arthur Blythe in the late '50s. Has he kept in touch since he moved to New York?

HT: Well, when he came here we went down to the Workshop — the U.G.M.A.A. building — and played half the night. They always come back. Something brings them back. They come back and some youngsters will be

in there who had never met them. Like Gary Byas, a young alto player who has been playing a little bit with Willie Bobo and is definitely doing great things. He loved Arthur and would see him when he was a youngster, but he didn't ever meet him and now they finally met. Most of those cats come back after a while, and if I see them anywhere, I'll ask them for some music.

JF: When you were starting the Underground Musicians Association what was the initial reaction in the community like? Were there many people telling you that you'd never get it to work?

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HT: Oh yeah, say, four-and-a-half out of five people. Well, actually the rank-and-file of the community, those hardcore people, they enjoyed it right away. Like the winos on the corner. One day the music wouldn't be there, and they'd come all the way down and say, "What happened to the music?" And we'd play late into the night and the police wouldn't come, because nobody would call them.

And we were playing in the church a lot, so we were spread out. It got to the point where they were inviting us to the elementary schools and senior citizens homes. Most of the time it was for free. When we did make money by working at the schools and the Black Students Union at some of the colleges, it wasn't much. We've got 25 pieces and they maybe had a budget of \$1,000 for the whole year. We never did what you would call a real tour. Years ago we would have three or four places in the state to go, and that would be only

maybe during the Black History Week at that time.

We have tried several times to get federal funds, but no way they was going to give anything to what we were into. And it involved youngsters in the neighborhood cleaning up things, erasing offensive graffiti, helping old folks cross the street, those kinds of things.

But the people in the community recognized us, that's for sure. And that's good. Every time you'd see them on the street, they'd say, "Is the Arkestra still rehearsing and playing?"

JF: The Arkestra played regularly at the I.U.C.C. church for almost nine years. Was the church an important base of support?

HT: I had had a vision of the inside of this church and I went there and it was just like I had dreamed it. Anyhow, at that time the reverend was allowing different groups in the black community to have their meetings and stuff there. And he would always house refugees. That's the last thing he was doing. The Salvadorans were living there just before he got sick. He was that kind of a reverend, really a community man. He had free breakfasts every morning for the community.

And man, we'd play for him, just anything he wanted. Because the community started believing finally. And it was in an area where all the so-called gangs were. They were coming and sitting in back of the band. And none of the cars were stolen. Nothing was stolen from the band. All the cats would say, "Hey, y'all playing?" And then once they come to you and ask about something, you lay it on them. They're listening because they see you all the time and believe you.

JF: Were there people coming from outside the community for these concerts?

HT: After a while, man. They'd come from the San Fernando Valley, Hollywood, and the beach area, Malibu. And the cross-section of people, it was beautiful. At first the white people would hardly come there because it was so far in Watts. But then after a while, they started making it. And they'd be there, man, the last Sunday of each month when we'd play. And

the black folks would be there every last Sunday. And then the Latins that were living in the neighborhood would fall in every now and then, because the band had some Latin cats in it. And so they would be coming in and say, "What's happening in here, man?" But they'd come in the church and they'd be quiet.

And, man, the reverend would come back through. They let him say something to them, and he'd be talking just the natural truth to them. We had people coming on those Sundays from babies to 80-year olds. And so we did make that impact, they recognized that there was something to look forward to.

JF: How is your musical activity seen by the greater Los Angeles jazz community? Do they tend to "ghettoize" you?

HT: It's gotten much better than that. The communications have opened up. And it's so funny, because it's a matter of survival in that kind of thing. You see, as long as I was breathing, it was going to stay alive. But, see, you can't count on that if you want to be able to leave something behind.

JF: Do the local critics notice you?

HT: Yeah, every now and then. But mostly it's the independent cats. In New York you go play at night and six or seven writers are there, because that's their job. But we're out here in this foreign country, so to speak. As far as getting notarized, you got to go past Leonard Feather, so to speak. See, I'd be leaving for New York to go there for notoriety and to make some money. Out here all the money is about 20 blocks up, you dig. But you know where they're coming from. I really would like to travel now and see some of the world.

JF: Have you done any studio work?

HT: Yeah, yeah. I've done some ghost writing for different cats, for Julie London, Sonny and Cher. I used to play with them too when they first got started. A lot of the guys would call me up and give me a gig to write something for them.

JF: What have been some of your other musical activities outside the U.G.M.A.A.?

HT: Mostly I've been writing and arranging for different size groups. I was pretty proud of the things I did with Elaine Brown. We did two albums together years ago, but they never got released. She used to be the lady with the Black Panthers. She's got a great voice, and she wrote all the music.

And I did some things with the actor William Marshall and a 35-piece orchestra for Capitol Records, which they never released. He's a Shakespearean actor, he's got a sound like Paul Robeson. I was working with those live theater things he was doing, for example on Frederick Douglass. We did something together for public television. From 1975 on, we've been making special trips to the black colleges in the South. I was part of a whole show covering the whole spectrum of the black experience, and I appreciated that. I was the only musician. If I didn't play solo, I'd pick up somebody in town. We went all over the South and did fundraisers for all those black colleges.

But, see, that's what I wanted to do with my band. We tried to tour those colleges in the '60s with the Arkestra. I got to know some of those people who are instrumental in doing things for the colleges in fundraising tactics. I mentioned the Arkestra to them. I had the idea that it would be a 100-piece orchestra of black musicians that would have a repertoire and play it all over the world and raise money for the colleges. That's the idea, but it must be held in abeyance for a while.

JF: Apart from "The Giant Has Awakened" on Flying Dutchman and some albums in the '60s with Lou Blackburn and Sonny Criss, you have not recorded much until recently. That seems surprising for someone who has written so many tunes.

HT: Well, when you go into somebody's building and they sign you up, you know that means, "We don't want you to do this no more, do that." I'd rather not go through that kind of hassle.

We took a vote on doing the Flying Dutchman album. I voted not to make that album, but was outvoted. This was even before the company started their part in it. Bob Thiele came into the area looking for us and found us in the garage. He came and said he wanted it

for posterity. And so we made it, but had a disagreement on it over the mixing of the album. See, because I was supposed to be there for the mixing, whether it was in New York or Los Angeles. But he went back to New York and mixed it.

Some years earlier I had gone into Contemporary Records with a group — Eddie Mathias, Walter Winn, Juno, Bobby Sears and a couple of rhythm players — and we did an album, but this cat wanted to change it around. So I took all my tapes out of the place. And that kept me out of the studio for years because nobody would hire me. I was off into the Arkestra idea of the community. But I got tapes on them from 1960, so that part is taken care of, you dig. I'll probably not release any of those tapes on a record. They're more like the kind of tapes you would probably have in the library. I would much rather for them to be done that way, and try to get more duplicates done and pass them around in the family.

JF: And then Nimbus Records came along. Are you a partner with the label?

HT: Yeah. It's gotten on its feet after a couple of years. Because we're not in a hurry. Another thing I learned through the years is that there's no rush, man. I mean, if you're into something, you're still doing it. And each time you do more, the more you get done. But it don't mean it's going to be recognized soon as it's done, and when it is hopefully the quality will be first. And that'll take a little time. After getting this aneurism in 1978, it took me out of the game for a couple of years. So after that, I was especially in no hurry, no way. Sometime I might go off on a trip somewhere and just hang, man. Because when you think about it, you have so much time here and all your time is valuable. I knew that when I got out. All my time is valuable, and that's the way I treat it.

JF: How did your illness affect your music and outlook?

HT: It gets you to a point where certain things that you would do before, you don't care for doing anymore. You don't have all the interests somehow or

other. And I was going through that in the hospital, and given a choice of whether to live or die, and people around you knowing that you will probably die. There was a chance that I might have had part of my brain wiped out and become a vegetable.

And, you know, I started racking up things about the music, leaving messages. But the whole thing was when I got out and came through all of that, the same thing was still on my mind — us, the music and the hook-up with the community — because this is what got me here probably.

It took me a few years now just coming back together. But I did try very hard not to worry too much about things. And the people around me who are very close to me acted that way and tried not to bring up nothing on death, and a lot of them be doing work or some things that should be done rather than jam me about it. I had to find out again how to speak to people, because after the operation I was slow and certain things that I didn't feel it was necessary to say wouldn't come out. You had to really be dealing with yourself. And the records that I had made were being played on the radio every day. You know, for my memorial. And now they haven't played them since (*laughs*), but that's the way it went. All of a sudden there were all kinds of offers for record dates and other things.

JF: After your recovery you played in 1980 at a Communist Party festival in Italy. Do you think the organizers chose you because of your being a musician strongly involved in community music?

HT: I think that's probably one of the reasons why, because they seem to have had all that together, what I had been doing in Watts. And that's okay, because for many years I couldn't get a gig because of that. So now, maybe it's the other way around.

It was just myself, Andrew Hill and some more cats from New York. I enjoyed the way it was received in Italy. And the architecture and all those things, that knocked me out. A very obvious thing was that it was mostly male at the concerts. That's all I ever saw in Italy, and that was kind of a strange thing.

Then I went back a second time, solo, the same year. When I got off the plane, Muhal Richard Abrams and another cat had come to meet me. And while they were getting me, man, someone broke into their car and took Richard's camera and the other cat's soprano saxophone. Just that quick. I said, "Wow, I thought I left America."

And then I got in a car wreck over there. I was the passenger, but I was the reason for the car wreck. People have these little motorbikes and they can ride between the car and the curb. It was warm and I got out of the car to take off the sweater. And as soon as I got out, man, boom! Two people had tripped over the door I had opened and I fell back into the car. One of the promoters — who happened to be driving — was a doctor and I had my passport on me, so that saved me from being detained.

JF: So it seems that sometimes there is no place like home. Has the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra continued since your illness?

HT: It was continued with one of the saxophonists. For a while the concerts were still going on over at the church. But during that time the pastor of the church got ill and they changed up, so the concerts stopped there. We have our own place on Vermont Avenue — the Crossroads Creative Workshop. We got it about six years ago from an old printer. We were involved in renovating the place and opening it up a bit more formal to the public. We're having different instructors come in there now.

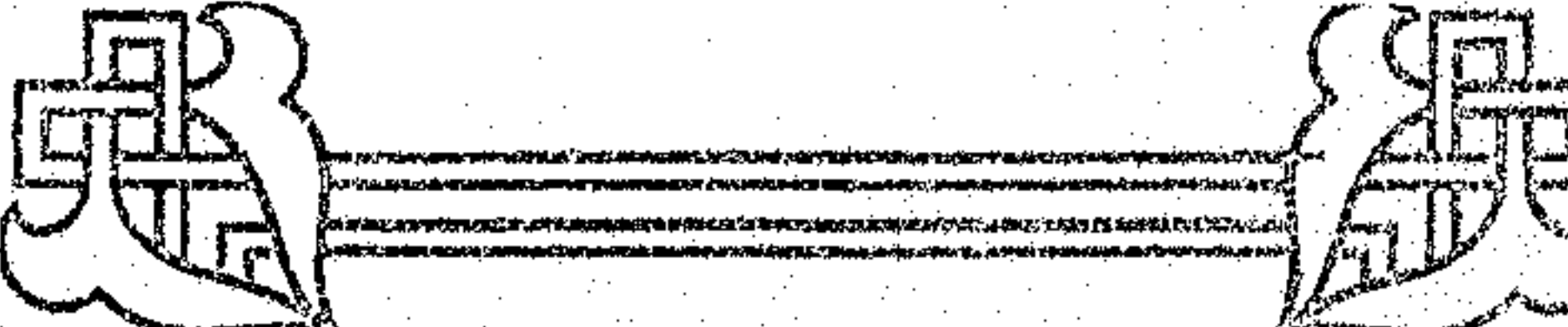
JF: After 20 years of working in Watts, do you think the U.G.M.A.A.'s efforts have had some effect, even culturally, towards building a stable and constructive black community?

HT: Yeah, sometimes you see it. But some days you walk outside and you really feel bad, man. Because you say, "Now, I remember this was happening when I was a kid." Nothing's changed. I can go across the street and take your book over here and ask one of these cats to read this book and tell me what it means. See, that's a drag when they can't read. So you say, "Wow, what have I been doing here, man? I ain't

done nothing." What I'm talking about, you know, it's my fault that this cat can't read, it's partly my fault.

JF: Don't you tend to get discouraged each time when you learn just how big a project it is. How much longer do you think you will involve yourself in community music?

HT: You don't have no timetable on it that says, "How long you gonna do this, man?" Till they throw the dirt over you, man.



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